

How TWI Develops Young Women Leaders

The Turkish Women's Initiative (TWI) offers an eight-month skills-based experiential "Sparks" leadership program. It is free to Turkish women of low and modest means, usually the first in their families to attend university. Ten years of Sparks programs have demonstrated that with confidence and leadership skills, young women can reach their career and life goals and make solid contributions to their professions, the economies of family and country and society.

In Turkey:

- Unfortunately, only 50% of university-educated women currently work outside the home. (*Turkish Statistical Institute 2018*)
- In addition, most women function well below their potential, meaning they are unable to reach the career levels and income they deserve. (World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index 2019). Turkey ranks 130th in gender gap of 149 countries.
- However, if both men and women participated equally in the economy, the gross national product would increase by 30%. (*McKinsey & Company Report, The Power of Parity 2015*)

The Sparks program promotes the principles and practices of self-discovery, career-building and leadership in a learning-by-doing environment. In the company of other young women with similar stories and with exposure to strong female role models, they explore who they are as modern Turkish women and what they want to accomplish. Through the social change projects they plan and implement in teams, they build skills and confidence in how they can contribute as leaders in their families, careers and society.

Donations make it possible for more young women to participate in Sparks leadership programs -- programs created to decrease the divide between "what is" and "what can be" for themselves, Turkey and the world.

Why university women of low and modest means? We have shown university women to be "higher impact," meaning they have the greatest potential to touch thousands of others as real agents of change. Women of this age and economic stratum are beginning to awaken to their potential. In most cases living apart from the day-to-day pull of traditional culture, they are especially open to gaining new insights and testing new possibilities.

Why an eight-month program? Leadership and career skills build over time and with practice. While typical leadership programs are short-term, Sparks women meet weekly for the eight months aligning with the academic calendar of the university to which they are affiliated.

What are the results to date? The Sparks program is managed in Turkey by our sister organization Değişim Liderleri Derneği (Change Leaders Association). Ten years after its launch and more than 400 graduates later, records show that:

- While only 32% of young Turkish women who start university actually graduate, **nearly all Sparks women graduate with a minimum bachelor's degree.**
- While only 50% of Turkish women university graduates work outside the home, **the majority of Sparks graduates are employed in their professions in a variety of fields.**

The challenge

University attendance alone is not enough for these young women to develop the skills and support they need to bring change to their own lives and communities.

University life can be especially difficult for young low- and moderate-income women, often the first women in their families to attempt higher education. Leaving a small town or village and being responsible for themselves for the first time can be daunting. They arrive at university with an academic goal but without a clear vision of who they are and how their degree will play out.

There can be feelings of guilt for not conforming to a family's plan for them to marry and remain close to home after high school. There may be anxiety about embarking on a career in science, technology, or business – fields traditionally exclusive to men.

Lack of finances can mean there is little money to participate in campus social activities – compounding feelings of isolation and depression.

Many lack connections to strong female professionals who can provide insight into the wider range of career choices. Without such models, young women often fail to see that their opportunities are limitless, regardless of gender.

Far from familiar surroundings and support, lack of confidence and vision of “what can be” often lead to abandonment of education and career goals.

That changes when fortunate young women find a Sparks program.

Our solution

For any learning program to effectively deliver lasting change, it must address three basic human needs: **Structure, community and purpose**. Sparks delivers all three.

Structure

Sparks women gather weekly to learn, apply and hone new skills. Self-development activities combined with real-life, hands-on teamwork build leaders who are adaptable to today's diverse and changing work and social environments.

Learning moves rapidly from principles to practice as Sparks women in each program engage as a team to agree on a social issue of importance. They spend the majority of their meeting times goal-setting, planning, developing, and acting to bring their project to conclusion. The end results are quantifiable changes for their community and – equally important – long-term project leadership skills for the women.

Community

The learning-by-doing team approach develops skills of collaboration, cooperation and friendship. Through their interactions with Sparks program facilitators, leaders, mentors, guest trainers and community leaders, Sparks women begin to develop their own web of connections. Through their ongoing meetings with peers, Sparks women build trusting and supportive relationships that can last a lifetime.

Purpose

Early in the Sparks year, the women participate in exercises that help them develop a sense of who they are as modern Turkish women. The act of addressing societal challenges broadens their horizons. Confidence is built as they engage in the process of bringing about change with tangible results.

At the annual end-of-year Summit when women from all the Sparks programs gather to celebrate, they exhibit newly-developed self-confidence and sense of purpose. Not only have many shed latent fear of the unknown, but they now embrace the process and excitement of becoming agents of change.

Examples of Sparks social change projects that, by extension, benefit hundreds and possibly thousands of individuals:

- A rural community now has free pamphlets of information about the proper use of prescription and over-the-counter medications.
- Urban area citizens learned first-hand about the difficulties of disabled people who must navigate activities that the abled find simple.
- Through graphic displays, art gallery visitors developed deep awareness of domestic violence toward women.
- For the first time, blind restaurant customers were able to choose food from a menu printed in Braille.
- Village children experienced the joy of their first-ever live performance of a play written, produced and performed by enthusiastic Sparks women.

Long-term impact

Additional Sparks programs will provide career and leadership development for more young women.

In Sparks' ten years of service, we have proven that women who develop confidence and strong leadership abilities are in better positions to take on challenges and subsequent action to make change for the better – for themselves and their families, their professions, the economies of family and country, and society in general.

In addition to the young women we serve directly, the benefits extend to the myriad others who touch and are touched by the program.

Sparks facilitators. The women who guide Sparks participants deepen their own understanding of leadership and social change.

Families, friends and employers of Sparks women. The demonstration of “what can be” alters perceptions and leads to increased opportunities for more women to reach their potential.

Sponsors and supporters. Association with the program elicits reminders of the value and joy of charitable giving, as well as the direct benefits of women's participation in business and society.

Examples of the paths of three Sparks graduates

- **Zehra** was the first in her family to attend university. Her lifelong dream was to become a neuroscience expert, helping to find a cure for degenerative diseases. She is a 2018 STEM graduate of university, and she is already demonstrating that she will be a leader in her field.

This year, Zehra is continuing her master's program at a Turkish university, studying bioengineering, with a specialty in neurological tissue engineering. In the summer of 2019, she accepted a four-month internship in the Biomaterials and Regenerative Medicine Laboratory at Drexel University in Pennsylvania.

- **Meryem** is the daughter of goatherds. For girls in this community, there is not a culture of literacy. From an early age, however, Meryem began advocating for herself. Through persistence, she overcame unimaginable social and familial obstacles to attend elementary, high school and then university. She joined a Sparks program in which she built new skills and opened her eyes to new possibilities.

Meryem returned to her village as a social worker. She is employed by the local government working on projects to aid the needy and disabled. Additionally, she has begun her own program to help local women become literate.

- **Serife**, coming from a family supportive of women's education, is studying law. Before the Sparks Program, Serife's post-graduate plans were to be married, have children and perhaps practice law. Due to new career horizons, she is now planning graduate studies and sees herself as a judge someday.